**Why inclusive language matters.**

**“THINK BEFORE YOU SPEAK”**

(by Aliana Garvey)

Inclusive language is a communication style that incorporates phrases and expressions that are inherently welcoming. By design, this communication style avoids assumptions that might exclude certain groups of people, even if the exclusion is unintended.

Commit to diversity and inclusion in all communications, strive to use inclusive language.

**TIPS FOR PUTTING INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE INTO PRACTICE.**

If you’re looking to commit to inclusivity in your daily interactions, here are a few ways you can get started:

* Be aware. The first step is to consciously make the commitment to being more aware. Ask yourself, “Am I inadvertently excluding anyone with the wording I’ve chosen?”
* While speaking, writing emails, or utilizing other forms of communication, make sure you don’t use gender-specific terms (“guys” is a common one) and instead go for words like “folks,” “team,” or “all.”
* Keep inclusivity top of mind.
  + Instead of making assumptions about biological parents and defaulting to the terms “mother” and “father,” define the family unit with terms such as “guardian,” “parent,” or “caregiver.”
  + The same goes for marital relationships. Using “spouse” or “partner” is always a better bet than “husband” or “wife.”
  + Use gender-neutral language when referencing careers and professions. For example, consider the following alternatives for these gendered job titles:
    - Chairman – chair, chairperson, coordinator, head
    - Mailman – mail carrier, letter carrier, postal worker
    - Policeman – police officer
    - Congressman – legislator, congressperson, congressional representative
  + Try using nonprescriptive language around faith and belief systems.
    - “Sending positive thoughts” is usually a better option than “keeping you in our prayers.”
    - Be mindful of other belief systems and the holidays people celebrate (or don’t celebrate).
  + As we work to eliminate the stigma surrounding mental health diagnosis and treatment, it’s important to be mindful of using terms like “OCD,” “ADHD,” and “addicted to” when referring to everyday behaviors. These terms should be reserved for actual mental health references only and never used in jest.
  + Steer clear of using words that are ableist in nature, such as “blind,” “deaf,” “insane,” “lame,” and “nuts.” These terms have the potential to be very offensive, even when used among close friends and colleagues.
  + Avoid using contradictory phrases like “awfully good.” These types of phrases create confusion not only for international audiences but also for people who identify as being on the autism spectrum.
  + Proceed with caution when using slang, as many slang terms have negative connotations from centuries ago. For example, “grandfather in” actually refers to a term from the 1800s that described a way to prevent Black Americans from voting.
  + Offensive statements that used to be social norms/mainstream but are offensive to certain genders: “You throw like a girl.”
  + Consider listing your pronouns (e.g., “she/her,” “he/him,” “they/them”) in your email signature, LinkedIn profile, and other public-facing communications.

**IT’S OKAY TO NOT KNOW.**

If you’re not sure of something, ask. It’s perfectly acceptable to acknowledge that you don’t have all the answers, but you need to be willing to look to a reputable source for information. We’re all learning! And unlearning. Your level of awareness and commitment to being more inclusive will ultimately shine through in your day-to-day interactions.

***Helpful Pronoun Information***

*Correctly using someone's pronouns is one of the most basic ways for you to show that you respect them as an individual.*

• *When someone is referred to by the wrong pronoun, it can make them feel disrespected, invalidated, dismissed, alienated, or dysphoric (or often all the above). Your first impression may be your last (i.e., the importance of making a first good impression with someone. It sticks.)*

• *Many names can be gender neutral (e.g. Pat). By being sensitive to and specifying pronouns, we can help minimize the occurrence of, and avoid the discomfort connected with, inadvertently misgendering individuals and making that first great “faux pas”.*

**Q: What if I meet someone who’s name could be male or female?**

**A:** *This is one of the key benefits to using pronouns! Gender neutral names are common and beautifully unique names for individuals of different cultural backgrounds. Think, for example, of individuals named “Sam,” “Ali,” “Chris”, and more. Pronouns are personal, but a name does not drive which pronouns the individual may use. You may elect to introduce yourself using your pronouns, which creates a safe space for the individual to share their pronouns. Ultimately, it is up to the individual to advise you as to their pronouns. And remember, if you make a mistake, as may happen when first meeting someone, you should just apologize and use the appropriate pronouns going forward.*

**Q: How do I verbally communicate my pronouns?**

**A:** *If you are meeting someone new, you might say: “Hi, my name is Marie, and my pronouns are she, her, hers.” This will signal a safe space for them to share their pronouns if they choose to do so.*

**Q: What if I am meeting someone who isn’t familiar with sharing personal pronouns?**

**A:** *Be prepared to explain that people often make assumptions about whether someone goes by “he,” “she,” or “they,” based on appearance, and that could be a hurtful assumption. It should be noted, we do not recommend pressuring others to share their pronouns because people may not be comfortable or be ready to do so.*

**Q: What if I misgender someone?**

**A:** *To misgender someone means to use the wrong name, pronouns, or form of address for a person’s gender. If misgendering happens, it may be hurtful; and when intentional or malicious can make a person feel their safety is at risk, in certain scenarios and environments that are less tolerant. If you misgender someone by accident, apologize quickly and then use the correct gender, without making an excessive show out of the mistake or your guilt, which can create even more discomfort for the person who has been misgendered. Show that you care by using the correct gender next time and trying to use the appropriate pronouns going forward. Note: It is your job to remember people's gender pronouns.*

*Misgendering someone can be a common mistake and is ok if corrected or not done with malicious intent. You can be an ally by standing up for others if you witness someone being harassed for their gender.*

**Q: How can I take an active role in ensuring appropriate pronouns are used for all?**

**A:** *If you hear someone using the wrong pronoun for someone, in most cases, it is appropriate to gently correct them without further embarrassing the individual who has been misgendered. This means saying something to the effect of, "Actually, Alex uses the pronoun she," and then moving on. If others are consistently using the wrong pronouns for someone, do not ignore it. It is important to let them know that you are their ally and to help the person who is misgendering someone to be aware of the mistake.*

*It may be appropriate to approach them and say something such as, "I noticed that you were being referred to with the wrong pronoun earlier, and I know that can be really hurtful. Would you be okay with me taking them aside and reminding them about your pronouns? I want to make sure that this group is a safe space for you." Follow up if necessary but take your cues from the comfort level of the person you are trying to help. Your actions will be greatly appreciated.*

**Q: Is there a list of dos and don’ts for pronoun use/gender identity?**

**A:** *Common dos and don’ts:*

***DOs***

• *Recognize everyone has pronouns and showcasing pronouns is respectful and inclusive; this reduces the chance of people being misgendered in the workplace.*

• *Use your pronouns when you introduce yourself so people can feel comfortable to provide theirs if they choose to. Note: Keep in mind that people may change the pronouns they go by.*

***DON’Ts***

• *Refer to a person as “it” or “he-she”. These are offensive slurs used against transgender and gender non-binary individuals.*

• *Refer to pronouns such as “they/them/their” as “gender-neutral pronouns.” While some transgender people identify as gender-neutral, many see themselves as gendered, but as gender non-binary. Better language is “non-binary pronouns.”*

• *Describe the pronouns someone uses as “preferred pronouns.” It is not a preference. The pronouns that a person uses are their pronouns and the only ones that should be used for them.*

• *Say “male pronouns” and “female pronouns.”*

• *Indicate that you “don’t care what pronouns are used for me,” if you are a cisgender person (a person whose gender identity aligns with the sex assigned at birth). Such a statement reinforces the privilege that many cis people have in not needing to worry about the pronouns that people use for them—that they are not going to be misgendered. It also invalidates the experiences of transgender people, many of whom struggle with getting people to use their correct pronouns.*